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Anticipations of Modernism in Eliot's Fiction

I

In this chapter I shall argue that there is a significant proto-modernist aspect to George Eliot's fiction. It is most obviously apparent in her final novel, *Daniel Deronda*, her most experimental work and one which can be seen as radically developing the realist novel in ways that anticipate modernism. Yet many critics have accused it of being divided against itself. F. R. Leavis in his book *The Great Tradition* notoriously proposed that its 'bad half' – the Jewish part – be cut out in order that a novel he entitled *Gwendolen Harleth* could emerge. Interestingly it was disclosed in an obituary in *The Guardian* of Boris Ford, ex-pupil of Leavis and editor of *The Pelican Guide to English Literature*, that Ford was working on such a project at the time of his death. It is understandable that this may have been contemplated since the general view of the English part of the novel is that Eliot's realism is at its most powerful, while an influential view of the Jewish part has been that it belongs to a different mode, such as prophecy or epic, with realism virtually set aside, so that the structural coherence of the novel is undermined. Exploring anticipations of modernism in Eliot's writing allows one to move beyond such divergent perspectives. As *Daniel Deronda* is the key text in any claim that there is such an anticipation, I shall consider in this chapter some of its proto-modernist aspects as well as wider questions related to Eliot and modernism, and in Chapters 7 and 8 discuss other proto-modernist aspects of it.

In both parts of the novel realism and symbolism coexist in some degree of tension without the one negating the other, a strategy that anticipates modernism. Two worlds, one English and one Jewish, are being represented, and this necessitates differences in treatment at both the realist and symbolic level. In both parts Eliot is exploring new territory. To find characters as powerfully represented in nineteenth-century fiction as Gwendolen Harleth one needs to look beyond British fiction to Europe, particularly to certain major novels in which women play the dominant role, notably Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, Fontane's *Effi Briest*. In the opening chapter of *The Rainbow*, D. H. Lawrence describes how instability and change are being introduced into the modern world by the aspirations of women: 'It was enough for the men, that the earth heaved and opened its furrows to them ... But the

woman wanted another form of life than this ... to enlarge their own scope and range and freedom.¹ Lawrence's sense of women as a dynamic force for change in the modern world was anticipated by the European novels I have mentioned, including *Daniel Deronda*, linking these novels with one of the most significant aspects of twentieth-century fiction. But Gwendolen Harleth is not, of course, named in the title, which suggests *Daniel Deronda* is different in important respects from the European novels in which women are the dominant figures. However, a primary concern of all of these novels is the problem of modernity, and this is a problem that can best be dramatized through focusing on women rather than men. To summarize somewhat drastically, the modern world emerged from the combination of two cultural forces: the Enlightenment which applied rationalist categories to the interpretation of world, breaking with older forms of thought, and Romanticism which emphasized the power of the subjective in the relation between subject and object or mind and world, so that human desire and aspiration were liberated from traditional constraints. It could be argued that men, because of their minimal role in the reproduction of the species and their comparative lack of involvement in domestic spheres, had always had a considerable degree of freedom and therefore that Enlightenment and Romanticist ideas merely accentuated men's sense of freedom. Women, however, primarily because of their role in childbirth and their greater identification with nature and the domestic sphere, had both more to gain and more to lose from the human impact of modernity.

The female protagonists in the novels I have mentioned are linked by their desire for self-realization, a desire which is subject to critical examination by their creators. Emma Bovary and Anna Karenina commit suicide, and Deronda fears that Gwendolen may do so, and though Effi Briest does not commit suicide her life is clearly tragic. Gwendolen is more fortunate than Emma or Anna since she has a protector in Deronda, though at her moment of greatest crisis her protector has chosen a vocation that will lead to him abandoning her. Significantly, in *Anna Karenina*, Levin, who would have been capable of providing Anna with support and protection, has little direct connection with her life. All four women are caught up in tensions and conflicts which prove almost irresolvable.

Self-realization and the conflict it creates are strongly related to sexuality in all of these novels. Emma Bovary, Anna Karenina and Effi Briest are all adulteresses. Adultery is also a significant presence in *Daniel Deronda*. Though Gwendolen Harleth is not technically an adulteress her relationship with Deronda can be viewed as a form of psychological adultery, since she wishes Deronda and not her husband to know her at the deepest level. Mrs Glasher, Grandcourt's mistress, is an adulteress. Gwendolen plays the role of a suspected adulteress when she acts the part of Hermione in Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*. Grandcourt's turning up unexpectedly in Chapter 48 when Gwendolen and Deronda are alone together suggests he fears that she is capable

of adultery, which would both humiliate him and be a threat to his power over her. With Emma, Anna and Effi adultery creates a disorder in their lives, which problematizes their relation to, and at the extreme cuts them off from, both social and natural forms of order: marriage, the family, motherhood. Emma and Anna are most like Gwendolen in being strongly Romantic in their longings and yearnings, but both *Madame Bovary* and *Anna Karenina* take a highly sceptical view of the Romantic impulse: it creates a desire for a degree of individual fulfilment in life that Flaubert and Tolstoy suggest is unattainable, not just for women but for men also.

With Gwendolen, the Romantic impulse does not at first find expression so much in the longing for emotional fulfilment as in a desire for power. She possesses 'the inborn energy of egoistic desire' (DD, 33) and feels 'the hunger of the inner self for supremacy' (DD, 43). Unlike Dorothea Brooke in *Middlemarch*, who had combined Enlightenment idealism – an optimistic belief that the world can be changed for the better – with a Shelley-like Romantic ardour and enthusiasm, Gwendolen is associated with a darker, more Byronic Romantic tradition. Though her confidence in her own power can be aligned with her sense that sexuality allows her to dominate men, its power proves to be fragile when she is directly exposed to male desire. She is not able to deal with Rex Gascoigne's love for her and her bouts of hysteria, as in her terror when she is suddenly confronted by the painting of a dead face when acting in *The Winter's Tale*, are open to psychoanalytic interpretation, for example, as signs that she may have suffered sexual abuse in her early life.² She is nearly destroyed when pressure of circumstance forces submission to the sadistic Grandcourt, a man who can achieve gratification only by subjugating others to his will, in Gwendolen's case to his sexual will, which creates a murderous impulse in her. In some respects, then, the aspiration to self-realization is given an even darker treatment in *Daniel Deronda* than in *Madame Bovary* or *Anna Karenina*, and the psychoanalytic aspect of the novel creates an obvious link with modernist fiction, which had inevitably felt the influence of Freud. The open ending is also in keeping with modernism: though there is some hope that she may learn from her traumatic experiences and overcome her demons, the reader is given no assurances. That Gwendolen can be compared with characters such as Emma Bovary and Anna Karenina suggests that the Gwendolen part of the novel brings into play at a symbolic level a variety of themes and issues related to the social and cultural changes that are the product of modernity, themes and issues which continued to preoccupy modernist writers and were further developed by them.

Though for generations of readers and critics Gwendolen Harleth is the artistic centre of *Daniel Deronda*, as its most powerful figure, the title obviously indicates that Deronda is intended to be the central character. He and Gwendolen are parallel characters in a number of respects, notably in lacking a secure sense of identity – he having been adopted and having no

secure knowledge of his origins and she having lost her father and become a reluctant stepchild – though they confront this lack in opposed ways. Refusing to define himself in terms of ego and power, Deronda seeks a more communal sense of identity in which the self's energies are directed to some larger ideal or vision. The symbolism that enlarges the significance of his character is esoteric since it is mainly derived from Cabbalistic mysticism and myth. This has created critical concern that realism has been relegated to an insignificant role in the Jewish part of the novel, with Deronda in particular representing an ideal, but I shall suggest that a more persuasive view is that in the Jewish part Eliot is radically extending the boundaries and limits of the conventional novel in a proto-modernist fashion.

Although Cabbala figures prominently only in *Daniel Deronda* – Mordecai's idealistic vision is plainly influenced by it – it is also referred to in passing in Chapter 14 of *Romola* and in *The Spanish Gypsy*, in which there is a Jewish astrologer, Sephardo, who has clear connections with Cabbalism. Why should Eliot be concerned with Jewish mysticism in her writing? She is normally seen as a rationalist, humanist and realist who rejected metaphysical ideas, proclaiming according to F. W. H. Myers, 'how inconceivable' was God and 'how unbelievable' immortality. What role then does Cabbala play in her writing given her apparent rejection of metaphysical ideas?

Cabbalistic ideas do not exist merely in the margins of *Daniel Deronda* but play a central role in its structure. Deronda is initially an incomplete person looking for significance and meaning in his life. In terms of Jewish myth associated with Cabbala this makes him a formless golem-like figure who needs a creator to breathe life into him. Mordecai has long awaited the arrival of such an individual:

But the long-contemplated figure had come as an emotional sequence of Mordecai's firmest theoretic convictions, it had been wrought from the imagery of his most passionate life ... Deronda had that sort of resemblance to the preconceived type which a finely individual bust or portrait has to the more generalized copy left in our minds after a long interval. (*DD*, 411)

Deronda is unformed until Mordecai gives his life shape: 'It is you who have given shape to what, I believe, was an inherited yearning' (*DD*, 819).

For Mordecai, Deronda is the perfect vessel who can unite with himself as creator so that 'Deronda might receive from Mordecai's mind the complete ideal shape of that personal duty and citizenship which lay in his own thought like sculptured fragments certifying some beauty yearned after but not traceable by divination' (*DD*, 437). The transmigration of souls is an idea central to Cabbalism, and Mordecai's relationship with Deronda is explicitly seen in terms of it. In a key passage Mordecai says to Deronda:

In the doctrine of the Cabbala, souls are born again and again in new bodies till they are perfected and purified, and a soul liberated from a worn-out body may

join the fellow-soul that needs it, that they may be perfected together, and their earthly work accomplished. Then they will depart from the mortal region, and leave place for new souls to be born out of the store in the eternal bosom. It is the lingering imperfection of the souls already born into the mortal region that hinders the birth of new souls and the preparation of the Messianic time ... When my long-wandering soul is liberated from this weary body, it will join yours, and its work will be perfected. (*DD*, 461)

In Cabbalistic terms, after this process Deronda's soul will achieve perfection and through him the 'Messianic time' can come into being.³

The obvious question this raises is why a writer like Eliot should be interested in Jewish myth and mysticism and make use of them in her fiction, incontrovertibly in *Daniel Deronda* and arguably in other works. One can, I think, dismiss the possibility that in her later years she rejected her anti-metaphysical and humanist views in favour of a religious or metaphysical perspective. In a letter written in December 1876 she denies any alteration in perspective over the period in which she had written fiction:

It is perhaps less irrelevant to say, àpropos of a distinction you seem to make between my earlier and later works, that though I trust there is some growth in my appreciation of others and in my self-distrust, there has been no change in the point of view from which I regard our life since I wrote my first fiction – the 'Scenes of Clerical Life.' Any apparent change of spirit must be due to something of which I am unconscious. The principles which are at the root of my effort to paint Dinah Morris are equally at the root of my effort to paint Mordecai. (*Letters*, VI, 318)

This would suggest that she no more 'believed' in Jewish mystical ideas in any literal sense than she believed in Christianity or any other metaphysical system.

II

In trying to understand the use and function of Jewish myth and mysticism in her work one needs to bear in mind two considerations in particular: her artistic ambition and her view of the novel as a genre. She clearly measured her work by the highest literary standards of the past, such as Greek tragedy and epic poetry of the quality of Milton's *Paradise Lost* and there are allusions to both in her work as previous critics have noted.⁴ What might be seen as separating literary achievements of the past from literary writing in the present is that writers of classical tragedy or epic poetry were able to draw on myth together with its underlying metaphysical system in order to give their works layers of significance beyond the level of the narrative. Although Eliot wrote poetry, including the ambitious verse drama, *The Spanish Gypsy*, her fundamental artistic commitment was to the novel, a literary form that, though well on the way to becoming dominant, in the nineteenth century was generally viewed

as grossly inferior in artistic quality to tragedy or epic, partly because of what were perceived to be the artistic limitations of realism. How could a writer using the novel as a form possibly compete with the likes of Sophocles or Milton?

It may look as if this problem would have been particularly severe for Eliot, who in her early career identified herself with realism in a very narrow sense. For example, in the first story of *Scenes of Clerical Life*, 'The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton', her narrator attacked those who prefer 'the ideal in fiction' and declared a commitment to representing 'commonplace' and 'insignificant' people (SCL, 80, 81), and in Chapter 17 of *Adam Bede*, 'In Which the Story Pauses a little', the narrator states that 'I turn without shrinking, from cloud-borne angels, from prophets, sybils, and heroic warriors, to an old woman bending over her flower-pot, or eating her solitary dinner'.⁵ Yet even in her early work it is clear that Eliot was never a conventional realist. For example, in 'Mr Gilfil's Love Story', from *Scenes of Clerical Life*, the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice is invoked,⁶ and in *Adam Bede* it can be argued that the name 'Adam' is not insignificant, while Hetty's story is clearly influenced by that of Hester Prynne in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, as her name suggests. Hetty is also linked in her wanderings after the death of her baby with Coleridge's Ancient Mariner. Myth and literary allusion, therefore, interact with realism from very early on in her fiction.

However, a significant change takes place with *Silas Marner*. It is possible to read the fiction up to that point predominantly in realist terms without needing to concern oneself particularly with other layers of meaning. In *Silas Marner* and all the novels that follow the narrative is organized in terms of a double plot in which parallelism, contrast, thematic connections are clearly present. How can this be reconciled with realism? (In a novel like *Middlemarch*, of course, there are subordinate plots within each of the main plots, creating an even more elaborate interplay). David Cecil admires Eliot as a realist and writes of her fiction: 'They are the first novels which ... set out to give a picture of life wholly unmodified by those formulas of a good plot which the novel had taken over from comedy and romance'; yet he complains that this realism becomes compromised later, that she 'sacrifices life to art. Her plots seem too neat and symmetrical to be true'.⁷ But whereas Cecil assumes that novelists should depict life in a way that appears unmediated by artistic organization, from *Silas Marner* on Eliot draws attention to structure and pattern. This may have been because she took the view that since form is intrinsic in literary texts and cannot be avoided, this should not be concealed from the reader. A realism based on such concealment was problematic both theoretically and artistically.

One of the main concerns of Eliot's short theoretical essay 'Notes on Form in Art' is where form comes from. She argues that form as applied to art – which includes poetry and indeed 'all literary production' – 'refers to structure or

composition, that is, to the impression from a work considered as a whole. And what is a structure but a set of relations selected & combined in accordance with a sequence of mental states in the constructor, or with the preconception of a whole which he has inwardly evolved?'⁸ Form therefore is produced by the subject and not immanent in the object. The use of the double plot suggests that she chose to acknowledge this by foregrounding form rather than seeking to cover it up in the quest for 'mak[ing] development appear inevitable',⁹ which a critic such as David Cecil would prefer.

It seems probable that the main reason Eliot decided to employ an explicit form through the double plot was because she saw it not as creating a contradiction within realism but rather as offering an artistic opportunity to the novelist. This may be better understood if one bears in mind the 'story–discourse' distinction derived from Russian formalism and developed by structuralist narratology in which 'story' represents the basic material of the novel that can be narrated in an unlimited number of ways, and 'discourse', a particular shaping, structuring and expression of that material.¹⁰ Since 'discourse' – or 'form' as Eliot might call it – is an inevitable element in any narrative it can be used by the novelist to incorporate the additional levels of signification which one would expect to find in epic narratives such as *Paradise Lost* but which were not looked for in realist fiction because the latter was normally perceived as setting out to represent reality in as unmediated a way as possible.

Silas Marner is significant because there is now no pretence at unmediated representation. The highly patterned plot, the mythic atmosphere, the obviously symbolic names of the main characters are evidence of that. Numerous critics have had difficulty coming to terms with this text because it seems such a departure from her other fiction, which is perceived as realist in its basis. Yet in terms of 'story', I would contend, the novel remains within the conventions of realism; the patterning, symbolism, mythic associations belong to 'discourse'. Critics of the novel, however, have tended to confuse 'discourse' with 'story' in their readings; thus U. C. Knoepfelmacher writes, 'The "mystery" previously denied to Dinah, Latimer, or Maggie is allowed to survive in this legendary tale', and he detects that 'mystery' in the style of the novel: 'In a story where obstacles come in threes, where rain and snow have affected the main events of the plot, such beliefs [as those of Nancy Lammeter] cannot be laughed away.'¹¹

But *Silas Marner* is distinctive only in emphasizing and thus drawing attention to the discontinuity between 'story' and 'discourse' through its use of various stylistic and formal devices associated with myth and fairy tale. Such devices, however, should not – *pace* Knoepfelmacher – be identified with how reality is conceived in the novel, thus implying the acceptance of a mystical or metaphysical perspective by Eliot. In the novels that follow it, the discontinuity between 'story' and 'discourse' may not be foregrounded to the same extent, except possibly in the Jewish part of *Daniel Deronda*, but it is equally

exploited, and in works such as *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda* layers of signification at the level of 'discourse' are built in to a degree that perhaps has no parallel in the history of the novel until Joyce's *Ulysses*, a text that takes the discontinuity between 'story' and 'discourse' to its limit, with both realism at the level of 'story' and layers of symbolism at the level of 'discourse' being taken to an extreme unprecedented in fiction. Whether there is a fundamental distinction between *Ulysses* and novels like *Middlemarch* or *Daniel Deronda* is, I shall suggest, doubtful, despite the efforts of certain critics to establish such a distinction between the work of the two authors.¹²

T. S. Eliot's 'Ulysses, Order and Myth', a key essay in which he tried to define what for him was a central element of modernism, praised Joyce's 'mythical method' as a viable solution to the problem faced by the modern writer who no longer is intrinsically connected to a coherent literary tradition or to a religious belief system that can make sense of the world. This 'mythical method', Eliot famously asserted, 'is simply a way of controlling, ordering and giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy that is contemporary history'.¹³ Eliot no doubt was echoing Stephen Dedalus's remark in *Ulysses*, 'History ... is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake'. Though Eliot's negative view of the contemporary world may seem to exemplify the modernists' pessimism about modernity, similar – but even more negative – responses to the modern world can be found in the Victorian era, as in Carlyle's reference in *Past and Present* to life in industrialized and capitalist Britain: 'it is to live miserable we know not why; to work sore and yet gain nothing; to be heart-worn, weary, yet isolated, unrelated, girt-in with a cold universal Laissez-faire: it is to die slowly all our life long, imprisoned in a deaf, dead, Infinite Injustice ... The times, if we will consider them, are really unexampled.'¹⁴ For T. S. Eliot a literary solution to the problem of modernity was both to represent the contemporary world in all of its mainly unappealing reality and at the same time through literary allusion and the use of myth to offer both an indirect critique and an aesthetic transcendence of it. George Eliot was an admirer of Carlyle – in a later chapter I will discuss the influence of *Past and Present* on *Silas Marner* – and for her, as for T. S. Eliot, the question was how should the writer engage with this 'unexampled' world. Part of George Eliot's engagement was to employ sociological, psychological and philosophical methods of analysis and critique to it, to a much greater degree than T. S. Eliot though the novel was a more appropriate medium for this than poetry, but I shall suggest that for her like him art and the aesthetic were also essential and she similarly employed symbolism, allusion and myth to provide both an alternative form of order to the world she represented in realist terms and through that aesthetic order to give the reader mental access to ideals and hopes that may seem utopian by rational standards. Her most ambitious attempt to fuse realist representation with a mythic dimension in which the utopian is invoked is through employing Jewish myth and mysticism in *Daniel Deronda*.

A notable link between Eliot in *Daniel Deronda* and Joyce in *Ulysses* is that both use the Jew as a mythic figure. At the level of 'story', however, Bloom in *Ulysses* remains on an ordinary human level, separated from the mythic and symbolic implications incorporated by Joyce at the level of 'discourse' into, for example, the culminating encounter between him and Stephen Dedalus. It has been argued that in *Daniel Deronda*, in contrast, Deronda becomes finally identified with his mythic self and its symbolic meanings. However, I think this is an unpersuasive reading. Deronda chooses to identify himself with Mordecai's idealistic beliefs regarding himself, but he never commits himself to literal belief in Mordecai's Cabbalistic ideas or in Judaism as a religious system. He tells his mother that his Christian upbringing makes it 'impossible' (DD, 566) for him to be a Jew like his grandfather and declares to Kalonymos, 'I shall call myself a Jew ... But I will not say that I shall profess to believe exactly as my fathers have believed' (DD, 620). Visionary idealism and Romantic irony – the latter most obviously associated with Hans Meyrick and clearly evident in the letter he writes to Deronda in Chapter 52 – coexist in the novel, and Deronda uses both in order to identify himself with Mordecai's idealism and at the same time maintain a metaphysical scepticism that nevertheless does not undermine that idealism.¹⁵ It is the deep humanist content of such idealism that Deronda values, but without the form supplied by Mordecai and Judaism that humanism would lack substance or focus. Deronda as a character therefore never becomes unified with the mythic and symbolic meanings Mordecai as prophet projects onto him even though 'he felt at one with this man who had made a visionary selection of him' (DD, 466). Although Mordecai's visionary idealism is not undermined in its own terms in the novel, Deronda views it from an implicitly Feuerbachian perspective, valuing it for the human feeling underlying it rather than for its literal content. Where Deronda self-consciously chooses to identify himself with the mythic and symbolic role provided for him by Mordecai and the traditions of Judaism, 'it is the impulse of my feeling – to identify myself, as far as possible, with my hereditary people' (DD, 566) – Bloom has no awareness of the myth which Joyce uses as a framework in *Ulysses*. But I would claim that in both the intention is to keep 'story' and 'discourse' quite separate. Myth and the visionary dimension are used similarly by both writers to enlarge the significance of their narratives, Joyce utilizing the *Odyssey* and various esoteric theories for this purpose whereas Eliot mainly exploits Cabbalism and the golem legend.¹⁶

This conscious use of myth and mysticism by both writers should be distinguished from the view, expressed for example by Northrop Frye, that all narrative is mythic in its basis, whether or not this was intended:

In the criticism of literature ... we often have to 'stand back' from the poem to see its archetypal organisation. If we 'stand back' from a realistic novel such as Tolstoy's *Resurrection* or Zola's *Germinal*, we can see the mythopoeic designs indicated by their titles.¹⁷

Frye implies that myth is unavoidable in narrative, that even the most mimetic form of realistic text will have a mythic structure at some level. Eliot no less than Joyce was, I would argue, aware of this and decided to exploit it rather than to ignore or repress it, as most realist novelists have done. By succumbing to the latter tendency the mythic escapes authorial control and destabilizes the realism such novelists set out to create.

Although critics have claimed that Eliot flirted in her fiction to varying degrees with the romance tradition which tends to incorporate myth directly within 'story', I would suggest that though an admirer of a writer of romance such as Hawthorne, she resists such an incorporation. The link is more strongly with Joyce since neither realism nor myth or symbolism dominate: they interact but have their own integrity. The main exception with Eliot is *Romola*, which she conceived as a 'historical romance', adopting that term from Lewes. Felicia Bonaparte, who admires it more than any of Eliot's other novels, writes, 'For *Romola* is not merely a poetic novel, but in its entirety, a poem' and goes on to say that 'Eliot did not draw [*Romola*] realistically but in epic and heroic [sic] proportions'.¹⁸ Realism is thus largely controlled by myth and symbolism. However, this was not Eliot's original intention, as only certain scenes 'were by deliberate forecast adopted as romantic and symbolical elements', but something she was forced into by allowing the romance mode to dominate over realism: 'You are right in saying that *Romola* is ideal – I feel it acutely in the reproof of my own soul in constantly getting from the image it has made ... The various *strands* of thought I had to work out forced me into a more ideal treatment of *Romola* than I had foreseen at the outset' (*Letters*, IV, 103–4, emphasis in original). In Eliot's fiction in general there is a tension between the realist dimension and the symbolic or mythic dimension and she exploits this, and here I would suggest she anticipates modernists like Joyce and T. S. Eliot. In generally ignoring this tension Eliot's critics have tended to misunderstand the nature of her fiction and have often consequently underestimated its artistic power.

With *Daniel Deronda* many critics have contended that the main Jewish characters belong to the world of romance, in effect being, in narratological terms, symbolically conceived at the level of 'story'. I believe this is a misreading. *Deronda* unlike *Romola* was never intended to be an ideal figure and, despite the claims of numerous critics, is in my view convincingly represented at the realist level. At a symbolic level *Deronda* has messianic associations as the person chosen by Mordecai to create a nation for the Jews, so symbolically *Deronda* offers hope of overcoming the recalcitrant reality that stands in the way of this idealistic vision, which one should stress was generally regarded at the time the novel was written as virtually unachievable. But at the level of realism *Deronda* is not typically heroic since he is a highly sceptical introvert lacking in the confidence and single-mindedness that one would expect of someone able to found a nation. He defines himself self-consciously in terms of Mordecai's vision of him but does not commit himself to full belief in it and is

even worried that Mordecai may be merely a fanatic. The main point I want to make, however, is that as with modernists such as Joyce or T. S. Eliot, there is a distancing effect between the realist dimension and the symbolic or mythic one. For George Eliot, at least, both have literary value but they remain incongruent. Another way of putting this might be that in both her work and that of the modernists allegory is being employed rather than symbolism, making use of Paul de Man's distinction between the two:

Whereas the symbol postulates the possibility of an identity or identification, allegory designates primarily a distance in relation to its own origin, and, renouncing the nostalgia and the desire to coincide, it establishes its language in the void of this temporal difference.¹⁹

III

In marked contrast to being connected with modernism, Eliot has been grouped with writers whose practice is entirely different, such as John Buchan and Kipling, whose representation of Jews is constructed to serve their ideological purposes.²⁰ Unlike such writers Eliot is self-consciously aware that any literary representation of Jews will be a construction. The narrative of *Daniel Deronda* itself is preoccupied with construction, to which the reader is alerted as early as the epigraph to Chapter 1: 'Men can do nothing without the make-believe of a beginning. Even Science, the strict measurer, is obliged to start with a make-believe unit.' Most radically Deronda is represented as constructing his own identity as a Jew. He does not view Jewish identity in essentialist terms, while for Jews such as Mordecai and Mirah it does have an essence, primarily determined by racial origins. When Deronda's Jewish parentage comes to light he is accepted as a Jew by them and would not have been accepted otherwise, but for him his Jewish identity is not caused or brought into being by his Jewish origins but precedes them as he wants to be a Jew before he knows he is, so that causality appears to work in reverse, an idea Hans Meyrick playfully alludes to in his letter to Deronda when he discusses 'the present causes of past effects' (*DD*, 549). However, one cannot arbitrarily choose an identity for oneself, as Don Silva tries to do with disastrous effect in *The Spanish Gypsy* because of his love for the Gypsy, Fedalma. Although love for Mirah also marks the beginning of Deronda's interest in Jewishness, more than that is needed for him to take on a Jewish identity, such as his desire for partiality and purpose in his life and his sympathy with Mordecai's ideals, and especially an intense process of education that involves an immersion in Jewish religion and culture. If Eliot had written the novel a century later one could imagine a plot in which Deronda's origins turned out not to be Jewish and that this made no difference to his sense of Jewishness or his commitment to the recovery of

Jewish nationhood, identity for him being constructed, chosen, committed to and not hypostasized.

Eliot recognizes that as soon as the word 'Jew' is mentioned, construction takes over and that there is no position one can adopt that is free from construction.²¹ Such an awareness is absent in the representations of Jews by writers such as Buchan, who lack her literary self-consciousness and merely identify their constructions with reality. Eliot's literary construction is clearly directed to certain ends, notably her support for cultural relativism and an organicist social philosophy based on shared assumptions and values that can resist the forces of social and psychological alienation, but it is also able to accommodate different perspectives that are granted their own discursive space: Deronda's mother and Pash – one a rebel against Judaism and traditional Jewish values, the other a believer in Jewish assimilation – are allowed to defend their positions in their own words, as are Klesmer who places art above racial considerations and Meyrick who is allowed a five-page letter to present his radically sceptical viewpoint. The literary discourse of a writer like Eliot, with its self-consciousness about narrative construction, its dialogism, its employment of allegory as a literary device, exposes the limitations of a critique that associates her with writers who signally lack her level of literary sophistication.

Yet when writers of the past, such as Spenser or Milton, used symbolism or allegory, its meaning was underpinned by a metaphysical belief system, namely Christianity. For a post-Romantic novelist who was unable to accept metaphysical belief systems, how was it possible to enrich a narrative in the way that Spenser or Milton had done by means of such a belief system? Here the writer whom one can most appropriately compare with Eliot in this context might be, perhaps even more than Joyce or T. S. Eliot, W. B. Yeats, a writer who wished to emulate the great poets of the past but who believed he was at a serious disadvantage since he felt cut off from the levels of signification available to poets who accepted a systematic set of ideas that could account for every element in the universe. Faced with this deprivation, Yeats decided to create his own system and correspondent mythology, exemplified in *A Vision*, from combining a variety of elements, such as Blakean ideas and theosophy. Whether Yeats actually 'believed' in his system in any literal sense is doubtful. The important thing for him was that it provided the basis for a poetry that could compete in complexity of signification with the great poetry of the past.²²

Eliot did not, of course, create her own metaphysical system. She did something similar, however: she found one ready-made as it were that would serve her purpose, namely Jewish mysticism. It seems clear that Eliot has links with those writers, such as Carlyle, who felt the need for something that would act as the equivalent of a belief system such as Christianity. They therefore attempted to create 'a new Mythos', as Carlyle put it in *Sartor Resartus*, or 'a supreme fiction', to use Wallace Stevens's phrase, that could provide the

benefits of a metaphysical system but which, at least for Eliot, did not need to be believed in any literal sense. Such ideas found support in neo-Kantian thought, exemplified most notably in Hans Vaihinger's *The Philosophy of 'As If'*, published in 1911 but apparently mostly written in the 1870s. G. H. Lewes's five-volume *Problems of Life and Mind* has links with such neo-Kantian thinking. Thus in science he refers to the value and necessity of 'conscious fictions': 'the value of such fictions appears in the aid they furnish to calculation.'²³ He describes science as 'ideal construction' – a phrase Eliot also uses in *Middlemarch*²⁴ – formed out of abstractions and generalities that have only a symbolic relation to the real, and he believes such a conception of science can be applied in the spheres of morality and metaphysics.

Few writers of the Victorian period would have been more aware of the demythologizing tendency of contemporary thought than the translator of Strauss and Feuerbach. On the surface this seems to present a writer who valued the mythic and symbolic possibilities of religion and mysticism with serious problems. How was it possible to emulate writers such as Dante, Spenser or Milton, whose work relied on accepting a metaphysical system with its basis in religion? One solution to this problem – the one I believe Eliot adopted – is to accept Feuerbach's demythologizing critique of religion but then to go on to remythologize on a new foundation. Feuerbach argued that the essential content of Christianity, and by extension any other religion or set of metaphysical beliefs, was human feeling projected into objectivity:

Religion is human nature reflected, mirrored in itself ... Where, therefore, feeling is not depreciated and repressed, as with the Stoics, where existence is awarded to it, there also is religious power and significance conceded to it, there also is it already exalted to that stage in which it can mirror and reflect itself, in which it can project its own image as God. God is the mirror of man.²⁵

It therefore became possible for a writer to use a mythology and its underlying metaphysical system without having the kind of belief in it that one would expect of writers of the past. There is ample evidence that Eliot agreed with Feuerbach that human feeling was the basis of religion, but whereas his aim was to use this to present a critique of religion she had little interest in any such critique. For her, the merit of Feuerbach was that he allowed one to value religious systems and metaphysical beliefs without sacrificing a humanist perspective. One could also choose between religions and spiritual beliefs on the basis of the human feeling that underlay them. Thus it is reasonable to assume that what attracted Eliot to Jewish mysticism and the golem legend that emerged from it was the power of the human truths or truths of feeling that they embodied. Yet, at the same time, the mystical and mythological embodiment of these human truths could be exploited artistically and enable the realist novel to take on layers of meaning in the manner of major works of the past, such as in epic poetry or tragic drama.

Eliot's novels, at least from *Silas Marner* onwards, can be read convincingly as works which aspire to alter the boundaries of realism in this way. In this discussion the emphasis has been on *Daniel Deronda*, the work which exemplifies this most convincingly. But whereas in the past *Daniel Deronda* was often read inadequately by being seen as somehow failing to achieve the kind of realism displayed in *Middlemarch* or *The Mill on the Floss*, I would suggest that a reversal of this is more persuasive. Instead of *Daniel Deronda* being read in the light of *Middlemarch* and found wanting, it may be more fruitful to bear in mind *Daniel Deronda* when reading her earlier novels. *Middlemarch* still remains a masterpiece of realism, but its power is even more enhanced if one recognizes its kinship with a text which clearly draws on Jewish mysticism and associated mythology. This is not to deny that Eliot's fiction belongs to the realist paradigm, as 'a set of experiments in life', but rather to suggest that one of her major achievements was to find a way of combining realism with an allegorical dimension which greatly extended the expressive range of realist fiction and which anticipates such modernist developments as radical allusiveness and the self-conscious use of myth, and in the following chapters I shall try to illustrate this further.